

THE LADY WITH THE HATCHET

THE SIXTH OF

"The Eight Strokes of the Clock"

By MAURICE LEBLANC

ILLUSTRATED BY R. M. BRINKERHOFF



Renine was so infuriated that he clutched M. de Lourtier by the throat and forced him backwards. "I'll have no more lies! A woman's life is at stake! Speak... and speak at once!"

THESE eight adventures were told to me in the old days by Arsène Lupin, as though they had happened to a friend of his named Prince Renine. As for me, considering the way in which they were conducted, the actions, the behavior and the very character of the hero, I find it very difficult not to identify the two friends as one and the same person. Arsène Lupin is gifted with a powerful imagination and is quite capable of attributing to himself adventures which are not his at all and of disowning those which are really his. The reader will judge for himself.—M. L.

ONE of the most incomprehensible incidents that preceded the great war was certainly the one which was known as the episode of the lady with the hatchet. The solution of the mystery was unknown and would never have been known, had not circumstances in the cruellest fashion obliged Prince Renine—or should I say, Arsène Lupin?—to take up the matter and had I not been able to-day to tell the true story from the details supplied by him.

Let me recite the facts. In a space of eighteen months, five women disappeared, five women of different stations in life, all between twenty and thirty years of age and living in Paris or the Paris district.

I will give their names: Madame Ladoue, the wife of a doctor; Mlle. Ardent, the daughter of a banker; Mlle. Covereau, a washerwoman of Courbevoie; Mlle. Honorine Vern-

isset, a dressmaker; and Madame Grollinger, an artist. These five women disappeared without the possibility of discovering a single particular to explain why they had left their homes, why they did not return to them, who had enticed them away and where and how they were detained.

Each of these women, a week after her departure, was found somewhere or other in the western outskirts of Paris; and each time it was a dead body that was found, the dead body of a woman who had been killed by a blow on the head from a hatchet. And each time, not far from the body which was firmly bound and emaciated by lack of food, the marks of carriage-wheels proved that the corpse had been driven to the spot.

The five murders were so much alike that there was only a single investigation, embracing all the five enquiries and, for that matter, leading to no result. A woman disappeared; a week later, to a day, her body was discovered; and that was all. The bonds that fastened her were similar in each case; so were the tracks left by the wheels; so were the blows of the hatchet, all of which were struck vertically at the top and right in the middle of the forehead.

The motive of the crime? The five women had been completely stripped of their jewels, purses and other objects of value. But the robberies might well have been attributed to marauders or any passers-by, since the bodies were lying in deserted spots. Were the authorities to believe in the execution of a plan of revenge of a plan intended to do away with a

series of persons mutually connected, persons, for instance, likely to benefit by a future inheritance? Here again the same obscurity prevailed. Theories were built up, only to be demolished forthwith by an examination of the facts. Trails were followed and at once abandoned.

AND suddenly there was a sensation. A woman engaged in sweeping the roads picked up on the pavement a little note-book which she brought to the local police-station. The leaves of this note-book were all blank, excepting one, on which was written a list of the murdered women, with their names set down in order of date and accompanied by three figures: Ladoue, 132; Vernisset, 118; and so on.

Certainly no importance would have been attached to these entries, which anybody might have written, since every one was acquainted with the sinister list. But, instead of five names, it included six! Yes, below the words "Grollinger, 128," there appeared "Williamson, 114." Did this indicate a sixth murder?

The obviously English origin of the name limited the field of the investigations, which did not in fact take long. It was ascertained that, a fortnight ago, a Miss Hermione Williamson, a governess in a family at Auteuil, had left her place to go back to England and that since then her sisters, though she had written to tell them that she was coming over, had heard no more of her.

A fresh enquiry was instituted. A postman found the body in the Meudon Woods. Miss Williamson's skull was split down the middle.

I need not describe the public excitement at this stage nor the shudder of horror which passed through the crowd when it read this list, written without a doubt in the murderer's own hand. What could be more frightful than such a record, kept up to date like a careful tradesman's ledger:

"On such a day, I killed so-and-so; on such a day, so-and-so!"

And the sum total was six dead bodies.

Against all expectation, the experts in handwriting had no difficulty in agreeing and unanimously declared that the writing was "that of a woman, an educated woman, possessing artistic tastes, imagination and an extremely sensitive nature." The "lady with the hatchet," as the journalists christened her, was decidedly no ordinary person; and scores of newspaper-articles made a special study

of her case, exposing her mental condition and losing themselves in far-fetched explanations.

Nevertheless it was the writer of one of these articles, a young journalist whose chance discovery made him the centre of public attention, who supplied the one element of truth and shed upon the darkness the only ray of light that was to penetrate it. In casting about for the meaning of the figures which followed the six names, he had come to ask himself whether those figures did not simply represent the number of the days separating one crime from the next. All that he had to do was to check the dates. He at once found that his theory was correct. Mlle. Vernisset had been carried off one hundred and thirty-two days after Madame Ladoue; Mlle. Covereau one hundred and eighteen days after Honorine Vernisset; and so on.

There was therefore no room for doubt; and the police had no choice but to accept a solution which so precisely fitted the circumstances; the figures corresponded with the intervals. There was no mistake in the records of the lady with the hatchet.

BUT then one deduction became inevitable. Miss Williamson, the latest victim, had been carried off on the twenty-sixth of June last, and her name was followed by the figures 114; was it not to be presumed that a fresh crime would be committed a hundred and fourteen days later, that is to say, on the eighteenth of October? Was it not probable that the horrible business would be repeated in accordance with the murderer's secret intentions? Were they not bound to pursue to its logical conclusion the argument which ascribed to the figures—to all the figures, to the last as well as to the others—their value as eventual dates?

Now it was precisely this deduction which was drawn and was being weighed and discussed during the few days that preceded the eighteenth of October, when logic demanded the performance of yet another act of the abominable tragedy. And it was only natural that, on the morning of that day, Prince Renine and Hortense, when making an appointment by telephone for the evening, should allude to the newspaper-articles which they had both been reading:

"Look out!" said Renine, laughing. "If you meet the lady with the hatchet, take the other side of the road!"

"And, if the good lady carries me off, what am I to do?"

"Strew your path with little white pebbles and say, until the very moment when the hatchet flashes in the air, 'I have nothing to fear; he will save me.' He is myself... and I kiss your hands. Till this evening, my dear."

That afternoon, Renine had an appointment with Rose Andrée and Dalbrèque to arrange for their departure for the States. (1) Between four and seven o'clock, he bought the different editions of the evening papers. None of them reported any abduction.

At nine o'clock he went to the Gymnase, where he had taken a private box.

At half-past nine, as Hortense had not arrived, he rang her up, though without thoughts of anxiety. The maid replied that Madame Daniel had not come in yet.

Seized with a sudden fear, Renine hurried to the furnished flat which Hortense was occupying for the time being, near the Parc Monceau, and questioned the maid, whom he had engaged for her and who was completely devoted to him. The woman said that her mistress had gone out at two o'clock, with a stamped letter in her hand, saying that she was going to the post and that she would come back to dress. This was the last that had been seen of her.

"To whom was the letter addressed?"

"To you, sir. I saw the writing on the envelope: Prince Serge Renine."

He waited until midnight, but in vain. Hortense did not return; nor did she return next day.

"Not a word to anyone," said Renine to the maid. "Say that your mistress is in the country and that you are going to join her."

For his own part, he had not a doubt: Hortense's disappearance was explained by the very fact of the date, the eighteenth of October. She was the seventh victim of the lady with the hatchet.

"THE abduction," said Rénine to himself, "precedes the blow of the hatchet by a week. I have therefore, at the present moment, seven full days before me. Let us say six, to avoid any surprise. This is Saturday: Hortense must be set free by mid-day on Friday; and, to make sure of this, I must know her hiding-place by nine o'clock on Thursday evening at latest."

Rénine wrote, "THURSDAY EVENING, NINE O'CLOCK," in big letters, on a card which he nailed above the mantelpiece in his study. Then, at mid-day on Saturday, the day after the disappearance, he locked himself into the study, after telling his man not to disturb him except for meals and letters.

He spent four days there, almost without moving. He had immediately sent for a set of all the leading newspapers which had spoken in detail of the first six crimes. When he had read and re-read them, he closed the shutters, drew the curtains and lay down on the sofa in the dark, with the door bolted, thinking.

By Tuesday evening he was no further advanced than on the Saturday. The darkness was as dense as ever. He had not discovered the smallest clue for his guidance, nor could he see the slightest reason to hope.

At times, notwithstanding his immense power of self-control and his unlimited confidence in the resources at his disposal, at times he would quake with anguish. Would he arrive in time? There was no reason why he should see more clearly during the last few days than during those which had already elapsed. And this meant that Hortense Daniel would inevitably be murdered.

The thought tortured him. He was attached to Hortense by a much stronger and deeper feeling than the appearance of the relations between them would have led an onlooker to believe. The curiosity at the beginning, the first desire, the impulse to protect Hortense, to distract her, to inspire her with a relish for existence: all this had simply turned to love. Neither of them was aware of it, because they barely saw each other save at critical times when they were occupied with the adventures of others and not with their own. But, at the first onslaught of danger, Rénine realized the place which Hortense had taken in his life and he was in despair at knowing her to be a prisoner and a martyr and at being unable to save her.

He spent a feverish, agitated night, turning the case over and over from every point of view. The Wednesday

morning was also a terrible time for him. He was losing ground. Giving up his hermit-like seclusion, he threw open the windows and paced to and fro through his rooms, ran out into the street and came in again, as though fleeing before the thought that obsessed him.

"Hortense is suffering. Hortense is in the depths. She sees the hatchet. She is calling to me. She is entreating me. And I can do nothing."

It was at five o'clock in the afternoon that, on examining the list of six names, he received that little inward shock which is a sort of signal of the truth that is being sought for. A light shot through his mind. It was not, to be sure, that brilliant light in which every detail is made plain, but it was enough to tell him in which direction to move.

His plan of campaign was formed at once. He sent Adolphe, his chauffeur, to the principal newspapers, with a few lines which were to appear in large type among the next morning's advertisements. Adolphe was also told to go to the laundry at Courbevoie, where Mlle. Covereau, the second of the six victims, had been employed.

On the Thursday, Rénine did not stir out of doors. In the afternoon, he received several letters in reply to his advertisement. Then two telegrams arrived. Lastly, at three o'clock, there came a special delivery letter, bearing the Trocadero postmark, which seemed to be what he was expecting.

He turned up a directory, noted an address—"M. de Lourtier-Vaneau, retired colonial governor, 47 bis, Avenue Kleber"—and ran down to his car:

"Adolphe, 47 bis, Avenue Kleber."

HE WAS shown into a large study furnished with magnificent book-cases containing old volumes in costly bindings. M. de Lourtier-Vaneau was a man still in the prime of life, wearing a slightly grizzled beard and, by his affable manners and genuine distinction, commanding confidence and liking.

"M. de Lourtier," said Rénine, "I have ventured to call on your excellency because I read in last year's newspapers that you used to know one of the victims of the lady with the hatchet, Honorine Vernisset."

"Why, of course we knew her!" cried M. de Lourtier. "My wife used to employ her as a dressmaker by the day. Poor girl!"

"M. de Lourtier, a lady of my acquaintance has dis-

appeared in a similar manner to the other six victims." "What!" exclaimed M. de Lourtier, with a start. "But I have followed the newspapers carefully. There was nothing on the eighteenth of October."

"Yes, a woman of whom I am very fond, Madame Hortense Daniel, was abducted on the seventeenth of October."

"And this is the twenty-second?"

"Yes; and the murder will be committed on the twenty-fourth."

"Horrible! Horrible! It must be prevented at all costs." "And I shall perhaps succeed in preventing it, with your excellency's assistance."

"But have you been to the police?"

"No. We are faced by mysteries which are, so to speak, absolute and compact, which offer no gap through which the keenest eyes can see and which it is useless to hope to clear up by ordinary methods, such as inspection of the scenes of the crimes, police enquiries, searching for fingerprints and so on. As none of those proceedings served any good purpose in the previous cases, it would be waste of time to resort to them in a seventh, similar case. An enemy who displays such skill and subtlety would not leave behind her any of those clumsy traces which are the first things that a professional detective seizes upon."

"Then what have you done?"

"Before taking any action, I have reflected. I gave four days to thinking the matter over."

M. de Lourtier-Vaneau examined his visitor closely and, with a touch of irony, asked:

"And the result of your meditations...?"

"To begin with," said Rénine, refusing to be put out of countenance, "I have submitted all these cases to a comprehensive survey, which hitherto no one else had done. This enabled me to discover their general meaning, to put aside all the tangle of embarrassing theories, and, since no one was able to agree as to the motives of all this filthy business, to attribute it to the only class of persons capable of it."

"That is to say?"

"Lunatics, your excellency."

M. de Lourtier-Vaneau started.

"Lunatics? What an idea!"

"M. de Lourtier, the woman known as the lady with the hatchet is a madwoman."

"But she would be locked up!"



But she did not wait. She rushed to the door, opened it and fled, with a hoarse cry.

"We don't know that she's not. We don't know that she is not one of those half-mad people, apparently harmless, who are watched so slightly that they have full scope to indulge their little manias, their wild-beast instincts. Nothing could be more treacherous than these creatures. Nothing could be more crafty, more patient, more persistent, more dangerous and at the same time more absurd and more logical, more slovenly and more methodical. All these epithets, M. de Lourtier, may be applied to the doings of the lady with the hatchet. The obsession of an idea and the continual repetition of an act are characteristic of the maniac. I do not yet know the idea by which the lady with the hatchet is obsessed, but I do know the act that results from it; and it is always the same. The victim is bound with precisely similar ropes. She is killed after the same number of days. She is struck by an identical blow with the same instrument, in the same place, the middle of the forehead, producing an absolutely vertical wound. An ordinary murderer displays some variety. His trembling hand swerves aside and strikes awry. The lady with the hatchet does not tremble. It is as though she had taken measurements; and the edge of her weapon does not swerve by a hair's breadth. Need I give you any further proofs or examine all the other details with you? Surely not. You now possess the key to the riddle; and you know as I do that only a lunatic can behave in this way, stupidly, savagely, mechanically, like a striking clock or the blade of the guillotine...."

M. DE LOURTIER-VANEAU nodded his head. "Yes, that is so. One can see the whole affair from that angle... and I am beginning to believe that this is how one ought to see it. But, if we admit that this madwoman has the sort of mathematical logic which governed the murders of the six victims, I see no connection between the victims themselves. She struck at random. Why this victim rather than that?"

"Ah," said Rénine, "your excellency is asking me a question which I asked myself from the first moment, the question sums up the whole problem which cost me so much trouble to solve! Why Hortense Daniel rather than another? Among two millions of women who might have been selected, why Hortense? Why little Vernisset? Why Miss Williamson? If the affair is such as I conceived it, as a whole, that is to say, based upon the blind and fantastic logic of a madwoman, a choice was inevitably exercised. Now, in what did that choice consist? What was the quality, or the defect, or the sign needed to induce the lady with the hatchet to strike? In a word, if she chose—and she must have chosen—what directed her choice?"

"Have you found the answer?"

Rénine paused and replied:

"Yes, your excellency, I have. And I could have found it at the very outset, since all that I had to do was to make a careful examination of the list of victims. But these flashes of truth are never kindled save in a brain overstimulated by effort and reflection. I stared at the list twenty times over, before that little detail took a definite shape."

"I don't follow you," said M. de Lourtier-Vaneau.

"M. de Lourtier, it may be noted that, if a number of persons are brought together in any transaction, or crime, or public scandal or what not, they are almost invariably described in the same way. On this occasion, the newspapers never mentioned anything more than their surnames in speaking of Madame Ladoue, Mlle. Ardent or Mlle. Covereau. On the other hand, Mlle. Vernisset and Miss Williamson were always described by their Christian names as well: Honorine and Hermione. If the same thing had been done in the case of all the six victims, there would have been no mystery."

"Why not?"

"Because we should at once have realized the relation existing between the six unfortunate women, as I myself suddenly realized it on comparing those two Christian names with that of Hortense Daniel. You understand now, don't you? You see the three Christian names before your eyes...."

M. DE LOURTIER-VANEAU seemed to be perturbed. Turning a little pale, he said: "What do you mean?"

"I mean," continued Rénine, in a clear voice, sounding each syllable separately, "I mean that you see before your eyes three Christian names which all three begin with the same initial and which all three, by a remarkable coincidence, consist of the same number of letters, as you may

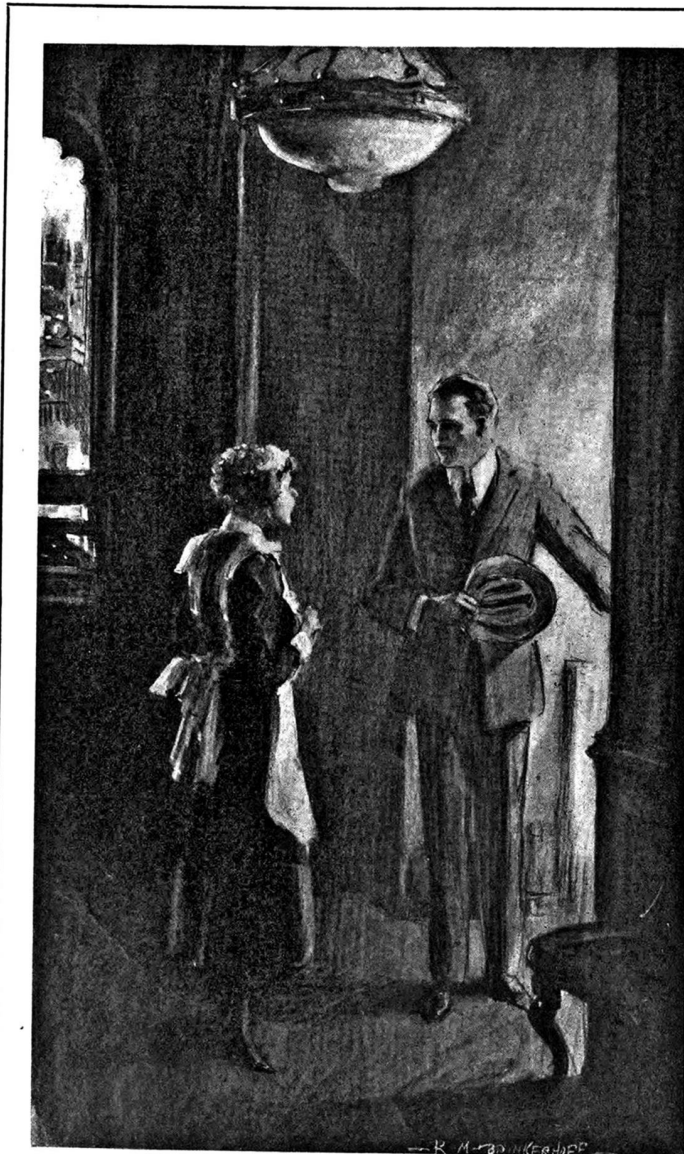
prove. If you enquire at the Courbevoie laundry, where Mlle. Covereau used to work, you will find that her name was Hilairie. Here again we have the same initial and the same number of letters. There is no need to seek any farther. We are sure, are we not, that the Christian names of all the victims offer the same peculiarities? And this gives us, with absolute certainty, the key to the problem which was set us. It explains the madwoman's choice. We now know the connection between the unfortunate victims. There can be no mistake about it. It's that and nothing else. And how this method of choosing confirms my theory! What a proof of madness! Why kill these women rather than any others? Because their names begin with an H and consist of eight letters! You understand me, M. de Lourtier, do you not? The number of letters is eight. The initial letter is the eighth letter of the alphabet; and the word *huit*, eight, begins with an H. Always the letter H. And the implement used to commit the crime was a hatchet. Is your excellency prepared to tell me that the lady with the hatchet is not a madwoman?"

Rénine interrupted himself and went up to M. de Lourtier-Vaneau:

"What's the matter, your excellency? Are you unwell?"

"No, no," said M. de Lourtier, with the perspiration streaming down his forehead. "No... but all this story is so upsetting! Only think, I knew one of the victims! And then...."

Rénine took a water-bottle and tumbler from a small table, filled the glass and handed it to M. de Lourtier, who sipped a few mouthfuls from it and then, pulling himself together, continued, in a voice which he strove to make firmer than it had been:



"Not a word to anyone," Rénine cautioned the maid.

"Very well. We'll admit your supposition. Even so, it is necessary that it should lead to tangible results. What have you done?"

"This morning I published in all the newspapers an advertisement worded as follows: 'Excellent cook seeks

situation. Write before 5 p.m. to Herminie, Boulevard Haussmann, etc.' You continue to follow me, don't you, M. de Lourtier? Christian names beginning with an H and consisting of eight letters are extremely rare and are all rather out of date: Herminie, Hilairie, Hermione. Well, these Christian names, for reasons which I do not understand, are essential to the madwoman. She cannot do without them. To find women bearing one of these Christian names and for this purpose only she summons up all her remaining powers of reason, discernment, reflection and intelligence. She hunts about. She asks questions. She lies in wait. She reads newspapers which she hardly understands, but in which certain details, certain capital letters catch her eye. And consequently I did not doubt for a second that this name of Herminie, printed in large type, would attract her attention and that she would be caught to-day in the trap of my advertisement."

"Did she write?" asked M. de Lourtier-Vaneau, anxiously.

"Several ladies," Rénine continued, "wrote the letters which are usual in such cases, to offer a home to the so-called Herminie. But I received a special delivery letter which struck me as interesting."

"From whom?"

"Read it, M. de Lourtier."

M. DE LOURTIER-VANEAU snatched the sheet from Rénine's hands and cast a glance at the signature. His first movement was one of surprise, as though he had expected something different. Then he gave a long, loud laugh of something like joy and relief.

"Why do you laugh, M. de Lourtier? You seem pleased."

"Pleased, no. But this letter is signed by my wife."

"And you were afraid of finding something else?"

"Oh no? But since it's my wife...."

He did not finish his sentence and said to Rénine:

"Come this way."

He led them through a passage to a little drawing-room where a fair-haired lady, with a happy and tender expression on her comely face, was sitting in the midst of three children and helping them with their lessons.

She rose. M. de Lourtier briefly presented his visitor and asked his wife:

"Suzanne, is this express message from you?"

"To Mlle. Herminie, Boulevard Haussmann? Yes," she said, "I sent it. As you know, our parlour-maid's leaving and I'm looking out for a new one."

Rénine interrupted her:

"Excuse me, madame. Just one question: where did you get the woman's address?"

She flushed. Her husband insisted:

"Tell us, Suzanne. Who gave you the address?"

"I was rung up."

"By whom?"

She hesitated and then said:

"Your old nurse."

"Félicienne?"

"Yes."

M. de Lourtier cut short the conversation and, without permitting Rénine to ask any more questions, took him back to the study:

"You see, monsieur, that special delivery letter came from a quite natural source. Félicienne, my old nurse, who lives not far from Paris on an allowance which I make her, read your advertisement and told Madame de Lourtier of it. For, after all," he added, laughing, "I don't suppose that you suspect my wife of being the lady with the hatchet."

"No."

"Then the incident is closed... at least on my side. I have done what I could, I have listened to your arguments and I am very sorry that I can be of no more use to you...."

He drank another glass of water and sat down. His face was distorted.

Rénine looked at him for a few seconds, as a man will look at a failing adversary who has only to receive the knock-out blow, and, sitting down beside him, suddenly gripped his arm:

"Your excellency, if you do not speak, Hortense Daniel will be the seventh victim."

"I have nothing to say, monsieur! What do you think I know?"

"The truth! My explanations have made it plain to you. Your distress, your terror are positive proofs."

"But, after all, monsieur, if I knew, why should I not be silent?"

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The Lady With the Hatchet

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"For fear of scandal. There is in your life, so a profound intuition assures me, something that you are constrained to hide. The truth about this monstrous tragedy, which suddenly flashed upon you, this truth, if it were known, would spell dishonor to you, disgrace... and you are shrinking from your duty."

"There will be no scandal. I shall be the only person in the world to know what has happened. And I am as much interested as yourself in not attracting attention because I love Hortense Daniel and do not wish her name to be mixed up in your horrible story."

They remained face to face during a long interval. René's expression was harsh and unyielding. M. de Lourtier felt that nothing would bend him if the necessary words remained unspoken; but he could not bring himself to utter them: "You are mistaken," he said. "You think you have seen things that don't exist."

Réne received a sudden and terrifying conviction that, if this man took refuge in a stolid silence, there was no hope for Hortense Daniel; and he was so much infuriated by the thought that the key to the riddle lay there, within reach of his hand, that he clutched M. de Lourtier by the throat and forced him backwards: "I'll have no more lies! A woman's life is at stake! Speak... and speak at once! If not...!"

M. de Lourtier had no strength left in him. All resistance was impossible. It was not that René's attack alarmed him, or that he was yielding to this act of violence, but he felt crushed by that indomitable will, which seemed to admit no obstacle, and he stammered: "You are right. It is my duty to tell everything, whatever comes of it."

"Nothing will come of it, I pledge my word, on condition that you save Hortense Daniel. A moment's hesitation may undo us all. Speak. No details, but the actual facts."

"Madame de Lourtier is not my wife. The only woman who has the right to bear my name is one whom I married when I was a young colonial official. She was a rather eccentric woman, of feeble mentality and incredibly subject to impulses that amounted to monomania. We had two children, twins, whom she worshipped and in whose company she would no doubt have recovered her mental balance and moral health when, by a stupid accident... a passing carriage... they were killed before her eyes. The poor thing went mad... with the silent, secretive madness which you imagined. Some time afterwards, when I was appointed to an Algerian station, I brought her to France and put her in the charge of a worthy creature who had nursed me and brought me up. Two years later, I made the acquaintance of the woman who was to become the joy of my life. You saw her just now. She is the mother of my children and she passes as my wife. Are we to sacrifice her? Is our whole existence to be shipwrecked in horror and must our name be coupled with this tragedy of madness and blood?"

RÉNE thought for a moment and asked: "What is the other's name?" "Hermance."

"Hermance! Still that initial... still those eight letters!"

"That was what made me realize everything just now," said M. de Lourtier. "When you compared the different names, I at once reflected that my unhappy wife was called Hermance and that she was mad... and all the proofs leapt to my mind."

"But, though we understand the selection of the victims, how are we to explain the murders? What are the symptoms of her madness? Does she suffer at all?"

"She does not suffer very much at present. But she has suffered in the past, the most terrible suffering that you can imagine: since the moment when her two children were run over before her eyes, night and day she had the horrible spectacle of their death before her eyes, without a moment's interruption, for she never slept for a single second. Think of the torture of it! To see her children dying through all the hours of the long day and all the hours of the interminable night!" "Nevertheless," René objected, "it

is not to drive away that picture that she commits murder?"

"Yes, possibly," said M. de Lourtier, thoughtfully, "to drive it away by sleep."

"I don't understand."

"You don't understand, because we are talking of a mad woman... and because all that happens in that disordered brain is necessarily incoherent and abnormal."

"Obviously. But, all the same, is your supposition based on facts that justify it?"

"Yes, on facts which I had, in a way, overlooked but which to-day assume their true significance. The first of these facts dates a few years back, to a morning when my old nurse for the first time found Hermance fast asleep. Now she was holding her hands clutched around a puppy which she had strangled. And the same thing was repeated on three other occasions."

"And she slept?"

"Yes, each time she slept a sleep which lasted for several nights."

"And what conclusion did you draw?"

"I concluded that the relaxation of the nerves provoked by taking life exhausted her and predisposed her for sleep."

Réne shuddered: "That's it! There's not a doubt of it! The taking of life, the effort of killing makes her sleep. And she began with women what had served her so well with animals. All her madness has become concentrated on that one point; she kills them to rob them of their sleep! She wanted sleep; and she steals the sleep of others! That's it, isn't it? For the past two years, she has been sleeping?"

"For the past two years, she has been sleeping," stammered M. de Lourtier. "And it never occurred to you that her madness might go farther, that she would stop at nothing to win the blessing of sleep! Let us make haste, monsieur! All this is horrible!"

Réne gripped him by the shoulder: "And it never occurred to you that her madness might go farther, that she would stop at nothing to win the blessing of sleep! Let us make haste, monsieur! All this is horrible!"

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many days? Why should one victim ensure her a hundred and twenty days of sleep and another a hundred and twenty-five? What insanity! The calculation is mysterious and of course mad; but the fact remains that, at the end of a hundred or a hundred and twenty-five days, as the case may be, a fresh victim is sacrificed; and there have been six already and the seventh is awaiting her turn. Ah, Monsieur, what a terrible responsibility for you! Such a monster as that? She should never have been allowed out of sight!"

M. de Lourtier-Vaneau made no protest. His air of dejection, his pallor, his trembling hands, all proved his remorse and his despair:

"She deceived me," he murmured. "She was outwardly so quiet, so docile! And, after all, she's in a lunatic asylum."

"Then how can she...?"

"The asylum," explained M. de Lourtier, "is made up of a number of separate buildings scattered over extensive grounds. The sort of cottage in which Hermance lives stands quite apart. There is first a room occupied by Félicienne, then Hermance's bedroom and two separate rooms, one of which has its windows overlooking the open country. I suppose it is there that she locks up her victims."

"But the carriage that conveys the dead bodies?"

"The stables of the asylum are quite close to the cottage. There's a horse and carriage there for station work. Hermance no doubt gets up at night, harnesses the horse and slips the body through the window."

"And the nurse who watches her?"

"Félicienne is very old and rather deaf."

"But by day she sees her mistress moving to and fro, doing this and that. Must we not admit a certain complicity?"

"Never! Félicienne herself has been deceived by Hermance's hypocrisy."

"All the same, it was she who telephoned to Madame de Lourtier first, about that advertisement..."

"Very naturally. Hermance, who talks now and then, who argues, who buries herself in the newspapers, which she does not understand, as you were saying just now, but reads through them attentively, must have seen the advertisement, and having heard that we were looking for a servant, must have asked Félicienne to ring me up."

"Yes... yes... that is what I felt," said René, slowly. "She marks down her victims... With Hermance dead, she would have known, once she had used up her allowance of sleep, where to find an eighth victim... But how did she entice the unfortunate women? How did she entice Hermance?"

The car was rushing along, but not fast enough to please René, who rated the chauffeur:

"Push her along, Adolphe, can't you... We're losing time, my man."

Suddenly the fear of arriving too late began to torture him. The logic of the insane is subject to sudden changes of mood, to any perilous idea that may enter the mind. The madwoman might easily mistake the date and hasten the catastrophe, like a clock out of order which strikes an hour too soon.

On the other hand, as her sleep was once more disturbed, might she not be tempted to take action without waiting for the appointed moment? Was this not the reason why she had locked herself into her room? Heavens, what agonies her prisoner must be suffering! What shudders of terror at the executioner's least movement!

"Faster, Adolphe, or I'll take the wheel myself! Faster, hang it!"

At last they reached Ville d'Avray. There was a steep sloping road on the right and walls interrupted by a long railing.

"Drive round the grounds, Adolphe. We mustn't give warning of our presence, must we, M. de Lourtier? Where is the cottage?"

"Just opposite," said M. de Lourtier-Vaneau.

They got out a little farther on. René began to run along a bank at the side of an ill-kept sunken road. It was almost dark. M. de Lourtier said:

"Here, this building standing a little way back... Look at that window on the ground-floor. It belongs to one of the separate rooms... and that is obviously how she slips out."

"But the window seems to be barred."

"Yes; and that is why no one suspected anything. But she must have found some way to get through."

THE ground-floor was built over deep cellars. René quickly clambered up, finding a foothold on a projecting ledge of stone. Sure enough, one of the bars was missing. He pressed his face to the window pane and looked in. The room was dark inside. Nevertheless he was able to distinguish at the back a woman seated beside another woman, who was lying on a mattress. The woman seated was holding her forehead in her hands and gazing at the woman who was lying down.

"It's she," whispered M. de Lourtier, who had also climbed the wall. "The other one is bound."

Réne took from his pocket a glazier's diamond and cut out one of the panes without making enough noise to arouse the mad-woman's attention. He next slid his right hand to the window-fastening and turned it softly, while with his left hand he levelled a revolver.

"You're not going to fire surely!" M. de Lourtier-Vaneau entreated.

"If I must, I shall."

Réne pushed open the window gently. But there was an obstacle of which he was not aware, a chair which toppled over and fell.

He leapt into the room and threw away his revolver in order to seize the mad-woman. But she did not wait for him. She rushed to the door, opened it and fled, with a hoarse cry.

M. de Lourtier made as though to run after her.

"What's the use?" said René, kneeling down. "Let's save the victim first."

He was instantly reassured: Hortense was alive.

The first thing that he did was to cut the cords and remove the gag that was stifling her. Attracted by the noise, the old nurse had hastened to the room with a lamp, which René took from her, casting its light on Hortense.

He was astounded: though livid and exhausted, with emaciated features and eyes blazing with fever, Hortense was trying to smile. She whispered:

"I was expecting you... I did not despair for a moment... I was sure of you..."

She faintly.

An hour later, after much useless searching around the cottage, they found the mad woman locked into a large cupboard in the loft. She had hanged herself.

HORTENSE refused to stay another night. Besides, it was better that the cottage should be empty when the old nurse announced the mad woman's suicide. René, assisted by the chauffeur and M. de Lourtier, carried Hortense to the car and brought her home.

She was soon convalescent. Two days later, René carefully questioned her and asked her how she had come to know the madwoman.

"It was very simple," she said. "My husband, who is not quite sane, as I have told you, is being looked after at Ville d'Avray; and I sometimes go to see him, without telling anybody, I admit. That was how I came to speak to that poor madwoman and how, the other day, she made signs that she wanted me to visit her. We were alone. I went into the cottage. She threw herself upon me and overpowered me before I had time to cry for help. I thought it was a jest; and so it was, wasn't it: a madwoman's jest? She was quite gentle with me... All the same, she let me starve. But I was so sure of you!"

"And weren't you frightened?"

"Of starving? No. Besides, she gave me some food, now and then, when the fancy took her... And then I was so sure of you!"

"Yes, but there was something else: that other peril..."

"What other peril?" she asked.

Réne gave a start. He suddenly understood—it seemed strange at first, though it was quite natural—that Hortense had not for a moment suspected and did not yet suspect the terrible danger which she had run. Her mind had not connected with her own adventure the murders committed by the lady with the hatchet.

He thought that it would always be time enough to tell her the truth. For that matter, a few days later her husband, who had been locked up for years, died in the asylum at Ville d'Avray, and Hortense, who had been recommended by her doctor a short period of rest and solitude, went to stay with a relation living near the village of Bassicourt, in the centre of France.